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COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Coordination of statistical data-collection from countries

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Statistical Commission, at its special session (New York, 11-15 April 1994), requested the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSTAT) to update and improve, on a regular basis, the Inventory of Statistical Data-Collection Activities, which was considered to be a permanent coordination tool. The Commission also requested that UNSTAT, in cooperation with the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, prepare an updated version of the Inventory for submission to the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its eighteenth session (Geneva, November 1995), after review by the ACC Subcommittee. 1/

2. The Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, at its seventeenth session (New York, 6-9 September 1994), noted the work that had been done by UNSTAT to improve and update the Inventory (E/CN.3/1995/2, para. 35).

I. ONGOING WORK ON IMPROVED COORDINATION OF STATISTICAL DATA-COLLECTION FROM COUNTRIES

3. The ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, at its twenty-seventh session (Geneva, 6-8 September 1993), suggested a number of improvements that might help to increase awareness of the Inventory at the national level and its use at both the international and national levels (E/CN.3/1994/4, annex, para. 15). Suggestions included (a) developing country and region-specific lists of data-collection activities; (b) assigning a unique identification number to each questionnaire; (c) specifically indicating the government department to which each data inquiry was sent; and (d) specifying the mode of each collection activity (i.e., questionnaire, magnetic tape or diskette, or direct access to national database). The Inventory is being improved by means of the relational database technique, which increases the usefulness of the Inventory as a permanent tool for identifying duplication and overlap in data requests, and helps to assist national statistical offices in obtaining an overview of the nature and timing of statistical requests from international agencies.

4. The above-mentioned suggestions require that a new design approach be adopted in order to make the Inventory more usable by international organizations and by national statistical and governmental bodies. The Inventory will be designed as a set of cross-referenced databases, comprising a master-inventory, several sub-inventories and reference files. Sub-inventories that cover specific features and directions of the data collection can be extracted (sorted out) from the master-inventory as described below.

Master-inventory

5. The master-inventory will be organized as a list of data-collection activities based on the ACC Programme Classification for Statistical Activities. It can be seen as a most comprehensive multi-subject database, providing information on (a) ACC Programme Classification headings and subheadings;

(b) tne full and abbreviated titles of international organizations and regional agencies; (c) the full and abbreviated titles of statistical data-collection activities; (d) the mode of data-collection; (e) the statistical agency or other government department to which inquiries have been sent; (f) the deadline for return and the month of dispatch of inquiries; (g) the country or region to which inquiries have been sent; and (h) other governmental bodies, such as central banks and ministries of agriculture, health, labour, education etc., to which inquiries have been sent. In order to simplify its presentation the master-inventory will not contain the description of each data-collection activity; such descriptions will be contained in a separate database and can be cross-referenced.

Sub-inventories

6. The set of sub-inventories can be described as follows:

(a) Sub-inventory of data-collection activities organized along international organizations and agencies lines: this sub-inventory is similar to the 1991 version of the Inventory, which contains information on the data-collection activities of the United Nations Secretariat, the regional commissions and other international bodies, as reported to UNSTAT by the statistical offices of those bodies;

(b) Sub-inventory containing the descriptions of statistical data-collection activities: the descriptions will be organized in a separate sub-inventory in order to simplify the use of the master-inventory and will be standardized. The sub-inventory will be a useful tool of reference that will describe the nature of each individual data-collection activity;

(c) Sub-inventory of the mode of data-collection: the sub-inventory will be organized into the following modes of collection: paper questionnaires, magnetic tapes, diskettes and direct access to national databases. The sub-inventory will be useful for assessing the increasing use of electronic means for collecting data from countries;

(d) Sub-inventory of the deadlines for return and the month of dispatch: the sub-inventory will present information on the periodicity of data requests: monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, yearly and other. The sub-inventory will be useful for assessing countries' reporting burdens in terms of their distribution over a given period of time;

(e) Country and region-specific sub-inventory: this sub-inventory will be circulated to each national statistical office and will contain only the data-collection requests directed to that specific country. It will facilitate the data-reporting process for national statistical offices and give them greater control of how they present data to international organizations and agencies. The country-specific sub-inventory can also be accessed by region to reflect the regional aspect of data-collection activities;

(f) Sub-inventory of the statistical publications issued by the international organizations and agencies: the sub-inventory will provide information on what specific data-collection activities are used in producing

the statistical publications of the international organizations and agencies. The international organization or agency issuing a given publication will also be identified.

Reference files

7. The set of reference files will include:

(a) A classification of Statistical Data-Collection Activities derived from the ACC Programme Classification for Statistical Activities. This sub-inventory will be useful as a reference source for better understanding the structure and coding system of the master-inventory;

(b) Sub-inventory of the membership of international organizations and agencies: this sub-inventory will provide reference material for the master-inventory. In the master-inventory, only departures from standard membership lists of countries will be reflected. In addition, in some cases data-collection for global organizations may be limited to specific subsets of countries, which will also be reflected in the master-inventory. Instead of country names, the codes and abbreviations contained in the Standard Country or Areas Codes for Statistical Use 2/ can be used to avoid overloading the master-inventory.

* * *

8. The master-inventory, sub-inventories and reference files will contain a substantial amount of cross-referenced information on various aspects of the data-collection activities carried out by international organizations and agencies. The set of inventories may be considered as a useful tool for tracing developments in statistical data-collection activities of international bodies.

9. Since urgent and legitimate new requests for data arise frequently, international statistical data-collection activities are constantly undergoing changes. This requires that the Inventory be continually updated in order to better serve the international community and national statistical offices, which can only be achieved if UNSTAT is supplied with information on such changes at least twice a year. UNSTAT work on the Inventory is planned to be finalized by July 1995.

II. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

10. The Commission may wish to:

(a) Consider what further action, if any, should be taken in relation to the coordination of statistical data-collection from countries;

(b) Suggest other ways by which the organization and content of the Inventory of Statistical Data Collection Activities can be further improved.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 9 (E/1994/29), paras. 39-41.

2/ Statistical Papers, Series M, No. 49, Rev.2 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.82.XVII.8).